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ABSTRACT

This document outlines the development of an American Studies learning community in which a literature and a history professor created a framework for collaborative inquiry across the two disciplines. The learning community was situated within General Education requirements, and thus reflected the freshman course level. The community was linked through the following connections: content; writing assignments; assessment; and teaching methods. Through the constant attention to the interrelatedness of literature and history, the course managed to overcome some of the disciplinary fragmentation common in college curriculum. The experiment resulted in creating an informal learning community of six students who continued that shared inquiry through their junior and senior years. (PM)

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Creating a Learning Community: American Literature and US History: A Teacher's Story.

by Grazyna J. Kozaczka

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CS 511 791

Creating a Learning Community: American Literature and US History

A Teacher's Story

Grazyna J. Kozaczka

This is a teacher's story of an "American Studies" Learning Community, an intellectual and pedagogical adventure at Cazenovia College made possible through the collaboration of Dr. John Robert Greene, a professor of history, Dr.Grazyna J. Kozaczka, an associate professor of English and 27 undergraduate students. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the financial support of Paul J. Schupf who endowed a Chair in History and the Humanities at Cazenovia College which is a small four-year educational institution with an enrollment of approximately 750 full-time students. The campus is picturesquely located among the rolling hills of Central New York.

DESIGN

When presented with an opportunity to offer Cazenovia College students a new model of education, both my colleague and I had only a vague idea of creating an experience for sharing knowledge. Since we were both Americanists, it seemed logical to concentrate on American Studies and create a framework for collaborative inquiry across two disciplines, literature and history. For a purely practical reason, any new model we presented had to fit within the parameters of the existing college curriculum which was built on ten competencies such as Written and Spoken Communications, Cultural Literacy, Ethics, Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, etc. Therefore, we considered the already existing survey courses in American Literature (a sequence of two) and in US History (a sequence of three) and searched for a method of linking them to create a

learning community. After we examined five different organizational patterns commonly identified within the learning community schema:

- Linked Courses,
- Clusters,
- Freshman Interest Groups,
- Federated Learning Communities, and
- Integrated Studies (Gabelnick et al. 32-37),

it soon became clear to us that only the first of these paradigms, the Linked Courses schema, was viable in our situation. Since our learning community had to be situated within programmatic or General Education requirements, it had to reflect the freshman course level, had to be open to all interested students regardless of their major or year of study, had to allow students free entry into and exit out of this multi-semester course of study, and finally the linked course content had to follow chronological order. Thus our three consecutive semester-long linked courses dealt with the following historical periods:

- Colonization till 1850,
- 1850 till 1919,
- 1920 to the Present.

The three-course link spanned three semesters between the Fall Semester of 2000 and the Fall Semester of 2001. The twenty-seven student participants in the learning community translated into 11 students the first semester, 10 students the second and 21 students the third semester. Five students, that is 18.5%, completed all three semesters and five students, another 18.5%, completed two out of the three semesters. The remaining 17

students, 63%, joined the community for just one semester. Interestingly, the second consecutive segment did not have any one-time participants. The movement of students in and out of the community can be easily explained by the nature of the college's curriculum. While the learning community offered six credits every semester, a total of 18 credits, the majority of programs did not require such a large number of history and literature credits.

From the onset of this project, we both felt that our learning community should be linked through multiple connections and we identified four that we considered to be the most important:

- content,
- writing assignments,
- assessment,
- teaching methods.

As I explained before, we could not count on a student cohort to form one of the strands connecting all three semesters.

Our learning community framework supported "a wide and carefully selected range of content" (Johnson 33). Yet in the planning stage, matching **content** and selecting texts became a struggle for us, and probably even more so for me than for my historian colleague since he followed the organization of a textbook he chose, Alan Brinkley's *American History: A Survey* which he supplemented with the historical documents collected in Paul Boller and Richard Story's *A More Perfect Union.* I decided on Paul Lauter's *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* as the main

literary text. In addition, students were also required to read historical monographs and novels. Both of us continued with the same texts for all three semesters. The greatest difficulty that I struggled with was the need to maintain a strong relationship between literary texts and important historical developments. Where could I fit my favorite authors or important literary figures who happened to be "ahistorical"? In the literary analysis portion of the learning community, I introduced students to the methodology of New Historicism since this critical approach allowed students to explore many aspects of the relationship between literature and history within the context of American culture. It was crucial to us that history would not be viewed just as the background for literature, but rather that literature would be seen as the manifestation of "...the social conventions and dominant beliefs of an era or a culture..." or as the "...criticism of these conventions and beliefs" (Burton and Hudson 122). I minimized the importance of biographical information unless it had a very direct bearing on the literature-history link.

Since both of us were published authors and shared a very strong belief in the concept of "writing to learn", we attempted to strengthen the course links through **writing assignments.** From the onset of the project, we decided that the courses would be writing intensive with a curricular link between them being not only thematic but also involving both formal and informal writing assignments. Our objective for inclusion of writing in these courses was manifold. First of all, we believed that through writing students would integrate both disciplines more fully, that they would be able to practice their critical thinking skills, and finally, that they would improve their written communication skills. Although all Cazenovia College first year students complete a composition course, we were well aware that as Nancy Shapiro and Judy Levine

suggested in *Creating Writing Communities,* "One freshman-level course cannot be expected to do the job" (81). Our students needed continuous practice in both writing and thinking critically. Thus we hoped that discipline specific writing assignments would be much more pedagogically advantageous than the "content-free" work in a composition class. We also hoped to achieve the results that Shapiro and Levine predicted when "...students take their writing assignments more seriously because they know they will have multiple readers" (82). We also believed that the learning community would strengthen students' sense of the audience which would not be limited to the two instructors, but would extend to a group of peers from whom they might seek input. Our initial decision to explore the writing connection within the link resulted in a continuous process of rethinking and evolution of teaching writing and the assessment of student work as well as the constant negotiation between sometimes conflicting needs and requirements of our two disciplines, history and literature. Contrary to our initial expectations, writing instruction had become of equal importance to the disciplinary content areas in this learning community as we continued to reinforce the composition course curriculum by constant attention to the writing process and rhetorical theory about audience and purpose.

The development of writing instruction in this learning community could be clearly divided into three stages, as we adjusted and modified our teaching methods after a careful reflection at the end of each semester.

In the first learning community semester ("Colonization to 1850"), writing assignments themselves were loosely integrated. Students were expected to work with two types of writing: weekly informal reactions and three formal comparison/contrast

essays. Weekly reactions, or what became known as reaction e-mails, required students to respond to two thematically linked short readings one in history and one in literature. Reaction e-mails were not graded, but students received credit for submitting them to both of us. Each instructor wrote comments and returned the assignment to its author. These student reactions submitted the day before the discussion class provided the basis for the exchange of ideas with both instructors joining to moderate the debate and making sure that the link between the two texts became transparent to the students. The student objective for the three longer comparison/contrast essays was to bring together two books, one a literary text, a novel, and the other a historical monograph. Thus for example, one of the papers called for a comparison of the literary treatment of Puritanism by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* with the historical treatment of Puritanism in John Demos's *A Little Commonwealth*. These three essays were spaced at about five week intervals.

Dissatisfaction with some of the writing outcomes prompted us to search for a closer correlation between writing assignments during the second semester learning community (1850 and 1919). We still required weekly informal reaction e-mails, but we were constantly reminding students that they needed to link the readings together. The scope of the reaction e-mails was also broadened to allow for the inclusion of pertinent material covered during the lecture/discussion classes. In addition, we tried to remedy the problems with the three longer essays by suggesting a broad theme which students were expected now to address by developing a hypothesis that joined material in both courses into a unified essay. In this slightly altered model, students still worked with two main sources, a novel, such as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and a historical

monograph, for example Bruce Catton's *The Civil War;* but they were also encouraged to analyze other material covered in class. Their essays were focused on a theme of violence in its many forms.

The final learning community semester, (1920s to the Present), saw another evolution of the writing assignments when we completely redesigned our link schedule and the structure of the writing assignments. We gave up reaction e-mails and substituted them with short two-page essays due each Friday. All the weekly essays were focused on a theme, "What does it mean to be an American?" and in responding to this question, students had to use material covered in both literature and history classes that particular week. They might also, if they wished, include sources from previous weeks. Three times during the semester, students synthesized their essays to create a longer and more in-depth piece. Their writing experience culminated with a lengthy essay which summed up the whole semester of reading and writing. Thus we created a clear progression of writing assignments where each essay could be almost viewed as a draft for the next one and where we were constantly looking at and discussing students' work in progress.

The decision to link our learning community through joint **assessment**, caused both of us some anxiety, yet we felt very strongly that to underscore the unity of both courses, students had to earn a combined grade for their work instead of separate ones for each of the two courses. Therefore, all student work was jointly graded which resulted in our weekly meetings devoted almost entirely to the discussions of students' written work. After each of us read and commented on the papers prior to the meeting, we debated the merits and flaws of each assignment and came to a consensus on a grade. Fortunately we both recognized similar assessment criteria such as:

- clarity, strength and expression of thesis/hypothesis;
- quality, quantity and accuracy of evidence supporting the thesis;
- organization;
- originality;
- effectiveness of the overall argument;
- correctness of documentation style used;
- awareness of audience;
- style and usage;

and most of the time, if not in total agreement about the grade, we would come within a half-grade of each other's score. There were a couple of occasions when we surprised ourselves by assessing student work in a diametrically opposite way and then the debate would be much longer and more heated. In these rare situations, the entire student-writing portfolio, which they submitted with every assignment, offered additional help, and we could consider the student's development as a writer, and come to a consensus which we always managed to accomplish.

In our learning community, **classroom-teaching methods** included mainly lectures and discussion sessions. Since my colleague represented a more traditional approach to teaching, most of his classes were conducted in a lecture format. Although I could not claim that I completely abstained from lecturing, most of my classes were student centered and drew on student interest in the assigned text with my direct interventions only if they were straying seriously from what I wanted to accomplish.

Just like writing assignments, our classroom management also evolved. Our learning community meetings were scheduled three days a week for a two-hour block each day. In

the first two semesters, we divided our class time into a history unit on day one, a literature unit on day two, and a joint debate on day three. To emphasize the change of pace at the end of each week, we even shifted the location of our meetings and joint debates were held in the cafeteria where we could discuss issues over coffee and pastries. During the first two semesters, this was the only opportunity for the instructors to be in class together.

The timing of the curriculum became crucial since literature discussions both drew from and supplemented previously delivered history lectures. The lack of leeway soon led to some frustration as there was very little schedule flexibility and often inspired discussions had to be cut short or other texts would not be covered.

From the start we realized that it would be more advantageous for both of us to be physically present during all class meetings, but issues of teaching load precluded this arrangement until the third semester when each of the two class days was divided into a history segment followed by a literature segment. In this new pattern both of us attended all class meetings an although during class time, we tried to stay out of each other's way, we still managed to underscore the thematic coherence between the courses.

Debate groups were moderated by each one of us in turn and we freely participated in them. However, we soon realized that our caffeine enhanced discussions quickly became intellectual duels between the two of us, leaving our freshman far behind. This was soon remedied, and I almost felt that if nothing else this initial sparring was important since we gained a new understanding and respect for each other and it also, I hope, showed our students that it was acceptable to disagree on issues, that it was acceptable and often even desirable to present a different point of view. Debate format remained the same during all

three semesters since it afforded the fullest link between the disciplines. They truly erased the disciplinary boarders and supported collaboration of the instructors and students as well as shifted the focus from the instructors to students.

Reflection

This brief sketch of our involvement in creating a learning community does not reflect all the negotiations and compromises that we faced in this collaborative effort trying to fit literature, history and writing into a coherent paradigm and offer our students a new model of education. Several of the contentious issues were easy to resolve while others still led to arguments. In evaluating my experience as a participant of a learning community, it is fair for me to say that it at least met if not exceeded my expectations. It required flexibility and quick response to any discrepancies between ideas and their applications. The title of a short monograph on experimental pedagogies, *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty and Disciplines* by Gobelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith perfectly identified what I saw as our greatest accomplishment. First of all through the constant attention to interrelatedness of literature and history, we managed to overcome some of the disciplinary fragmentation so common in college curriculum and we "...enhanced pattern seeing and connection making..."(Rettalick 121) by our students. The two linked courses constantly fed of each other and the differences in our teaching styles notwithstanding, the Learning Community did enter into the shared inquiry attitude, and students seeing the two of us becoming collaborators, joined in themselves, especially through the discussion and debate sessions and also through their written work. They "...became actively involved in constructing understandings" (Rettalick 120). They also honed their interpersonal skills, for example

listening actively and responding as well as thinking critically. Teaching together, we probably came closer to John Dewey's idea of the progressive school than at any other time while teaching alone (Gabelnick 16). We at least managed to begin the building of an inquiry-based culture for our students. This experiment resulted also in creating an informal learning community of six students, former members of our cohort, who now in their Junior and Senior years were still moving together from class to class and continued that shared inquiry. The two of us acquired a new appreciation for the discipline of the other instructor and we expanded our teaching repertoire through observing and interacting within a classroom situation. We became more thoughtful and reflective practitioners.

Personally, since I divide my time on campus between teaching American literature and composition, it was especially important to assess our teaching of writing.

A. REACTION E-MAILS:

a. We found reaction e-mails to be extremely valuable since they ensured that students completed their assigned readings before the discussion class.

b. Reaction e-mails provided a forum for the students to ask questions about the text that they would be embarrassed to voice in class so they aided in reading comprehension.

c. The informal style of writing allowed students to express their ideas freely and take chances on some interpretations which might have been a little more risky.

d. However, students continued to perceive each text as a separate unit and most of the time had difficulty in going beyond providing us with two summaries instead of a synthesis of ideas.

e. Because they used their reaction e-mails during class discussions, they often locked themselves into one point of view and had difficulty keeping up with the flow of ideas presented by other students.

B. LINKED COMPARISON/CONTRAST ESSAYS:

a. We envisioned essays in which students would create a thesis about the time period, a historical figure or an important issue under discussion and would support it with evidence drawn from both historical and literary sources.

b. From the onset, we realized that although there were inherent difficulties, we thought that we could remedy the situation through class discussion and additional writing instruction. The problem was twofold:

i. Students wrote essays without a focused thesis and continued the pattern we had noticed in reaction e-mails: their essays were clearly split into two parts with one discussing one book and the other devoted to the second reading.

ii. Students would try to prove that one source was more trustworthy or accurate than the other. They invariably decided that historical monographs presented objective information while the works of fiction, just by their nature, were not to be believed. Thus the only

evidence offered to support their claim was the genre of the source used.

During the second semester when students had to work with one broad theme of violence, we again encountered some unexpected difficulties although the problem seemed to be reversed from the previous semester. We could not achieve a disciplinary balance. Now students could easily identify and discuss examples of violence in a work of imaginative literature while they had a much more difficult time with information given in a historical document. For example, casualty statistics did not have the same effect on them as the vivid descriptions of the dead or dying soldiers. Thus again their papers lacked balance and became slanted towards literary sources. We have also realized that the papers were too isolated from the rest of the linked courses' curriculum since students limited their analysis to two paired sources at a time.

At this time, we had to face what we suspected for awhile; our major flaw was the lack of correlation between the reaction e-mails and the formal essays that the students had to write. Although to us the linkage in the essay writing process where the students had to combine literary analysis of fiction with the analysis of historical monographs was quite clear, we could not make it clear to the students.

Unquestionably, we came the closest to our envisioned ideal during the third semester when students wrote weekly papers responding to the question of what it meant to be an American and then synthesized them into longer, better developed pieces. That semester we noticed a marked difference in the quality of student writing. They seemed to have a clearer sense of our expectations and felt more comfortable with their writing.

The essays all had a thesis statement and a variety of evidence which, of course, did not mean that all of them were perfectly balanced. Some of the students still tended to gravitate more towards historical sources while others focused on literature. This often reflected their personal interests. (In our linked courses, we had mainly English and Social Science majors). We did notice that they consulted their peers about writing issues without our prompting, and often sought our advice at various stages in their writing process with the questions about the thesis statement being by far the most frequent. However, what we judged as an improvement in student work might have been the result of different curriculum. In the literature portion of the link, students were much more at ease reading modern texts.

My reflection would be incomplete without a list of difficulties that we encountered and were not always able to overcome successfully.

1. We had to come to terms with some trivial disciplinary differences such as for example if students should use the MLA or Chicago documentation style and if the word "thesis" or "hypothesis" should be used to denote the main point of their essays.
2. The more difficult issues to resolve included for example the choice of writing modes. My students in "stand alone" writing intensive literature classes were exposed to several modes as they might explore description, comparison and contrast, evaluation and sometimes creative pieces and were not limited to argument writing. For the last unit in the link, we eliminated all variety in writing modes and focused solely on argumentation.

3. At times, the quality of student literary analysis was affected negatively by the fact that they had to correlate literary evidence with historical evidence. Occasionally in a desperate search for evidence to support their thesis, they misinterpreted literary texts.
4. But there had also been moments when they made a leap between the two disciplines and drew new and innovative conclusions from the connection.
5. Because of the disciplinary slant, we sometimes engaged in heated arguments about assessment especially when we tried to reach consensus on what was more valuable a beautiful turn of phrase and a good sense of personal writing style or the cold logic of an argument.
6. And not without importance was the issue of an almost overwhelming time investment on the part of linked instructors in preparing, teaching, coordinating and evaluating the curriculum, the students and themselves.

And finally two things that were especially gratifying to me personally. Although I did not conduct a formal survey, from the anecdotal evidence of informal talks with the students, it became obvious to me that our learning community left a very positive impression on them. And also our efforts received a stamp of approval from our faculty colleagues who after examining our work voted on the inclusion of a learning community model in the Cazenovia College Honors Program. The fact that we have begun discussing designing a new learning community for the next academic year, speaks to the value we both see in this experience.

Creating a Learning Community: American Literature and United States History

Grazyna J. Kozaczka

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